

COLORLINES

The national newsmagazine on race and politics

July–August 2008



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veterans are
women of color.
Here are three
of their stories.

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factors put Black
girls at risk.

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Superheroes take
on racism and
eco-disasters.



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FELIX BARRETT

Kayhan Irani during a performance of her one-woman show *We've Come Undone* explores the trauma of detention, disappearance and deportation.

REHEARSING REVOLUTION

Performance artist Kayhan Irani on the political power of storytelling.

By Almah LaVon Rice

A COLD DAY IN HARLEM finds a woman collecting signatures for yet another idealistic endeavor. She's from the Public Coalition of Improvements and Renovations, and her petition is in support of the One Manhattan Project. "We want to reunify all of Manhattan after 9/11," she explains. "We feel like a lot of neighborhoods have been fragmented and lost their tourist and business dollars. We think it would be a good idea if we reestablish all the original avenue names." In particular, the proposal calls for Harlem streets bearing names such as Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. to be assimilated into the numbered avenues found throughout Manhattan, in the spirit of "simplifying and unifying" the culturally diverse borough. But the primarily Black passersby ain't havin' it. Tempers flare. They raise their voices at the woman with the petition, along with her male coworker. More than a few residents vow to fight this mysterious organization peddling cultural and historical erasure in the name of patriotic unity. As Harlem continues to be besieged by big-box stores

and other harbingers of gentrification, the theft of such warrior names is an unacceptable defeat. When told that other folks in the neighborhoods had signed the petition, a couple of women on the street can't believe their neighbors' outrageous amnesia.

Which kinda makes sense. The One Manhattan Project lacks credibility because, well, it isn't real. Neither is the Public Coalition of Improvements and Renovations. Even Kayhan Irani is in character as the woman collecting signatures and so is her partner in creative crime. Irani is a 30-year-old Harlem resident putting on an act—to be exact, what Brazilian political theatre maestro Augusto Boal dubbed "invisible theater." It's a Theater of the Oppressed technique in which a scene is played out in public to an unwitting audience in order to provoke discussion. As such, the invisible theatrical moment in Harlem becomes myth, not in the sense of being "fake" but as in "a story that never was but will always be." After all, the Public Coalition of Improvements and Renovations proposal is eerily plausible. We've all endured the language of bureaucracy—we're all living in an era in which any antic from the State, no matter how bizarre and useless, is being justified in the holy name of 9/11.

Actually, 9/11 dramatically changed the trajectory of Irani's artistic journey. Born in Bombay and raised in Queens, the performance artist of Farsi descent used to be more interested in traditional shows and street theater in more presentational formats. But after that fateful September day, Irani, who now calls herself an "artist dedicated to unleashing beauty and truth from unconventional and irregular platforms," had to alter her art. "I really felt an urgency for participation and especially because of the tremendous amount of propaganda and lies," she says.

According to Irani, art has the ability to distill and clarify when massive misinformation campaigns aim to disorient. "I think people need more of that because there's just so much more crap to deal with," she continues.

When mainstream media was painting imperialist designs like a surrealist collage complete with odd juxtapositions—the 9/11 attack requires invading Iraq, anyone?—the marriage of art and activism seemed apt. After all, the instructive violence of detention and torture made for all-too-real political theater. In the early post-9/11 days, Irani was convinced she had to be an artistic and political alarm clock. "I thought, 'What's going to happen?'" she remembers. "Are people going to totally shut down? Are they going to totally close their eyes to this rise of fascism?"

The wide-eyed Irani created *We've Come Undone* to

keep viewers from sleeping through injustice. Through a series of monologues, the multidisciplinary piece explores the trauma of detention, disappearance and deportation in Arab, Muslim, South-Asian and other communities in the United States. In her artist's statement, Irani says that we're "rummaging through the heaps of our notions" in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent warmongering and repression. She goes on to ask, "What happens when lie and suspicion are allowed to permeate the fabric of our society and embed into the weave?" Embodying an IRS agent, a Sikh woman and other characters in her one-woman show, Irani demonstrates that truth is happiest when traveling inside of a story.

Irani has been long convinced of the radical potential of storytelling. While some young girls might have envisioned themselves as princesses or imaginary creatures, Irani had something else in mind as a youngster. "I remember in the fourth grade writing a play about a suffragette," she says. The woman suffered through an abusive marriage and was eventually killed by her husband—but not before rallying other women to fight for their rights. Irani went on to graduate from the High School of Performing Arts (of the movie, *Fame*) and design her own major—Theater and Social Change—at the City University of New York.

Storytelling, according to Irani, is an inspiring way to enact another possible world. "I like to think of the workshops and art that I do as practicing solidarity," she explains. "Through embodying these characters, through embodying still images, we get to practice what it might look like to resist oppression." Invoking Boal's conception of "osmosis," she continues: "Sitting in the audience and seeing that image, the person...the thin layer between real and imaginary disappears, and that person is seeing something in their own life there on the stage...it's really a practicing of strategy. How can we talk back?"

One way might be The Storytelling Project, an anti-racism curriculum designed for high school students. Irani was a creative consultant for the project charged with incorporating theater games and exercises and crafting the artistic pedagogy. As part of the creative team, she trained teachers and facilitators at various conferences and through the New York City public school system, in addition to seeing it in action in the classroom herself. One of the first steps, she insists, is "creating a storytelling community" in which participants get to ask, "Who am I? Where did I come from? Where did my family come from? What's my positionality?" Relationships must be nurtured while delving into race and racism, says Irani,



Kayhan Irani was a creative consultant for The Storytelling Project, an anti-racism curriculum designed for high school students.

or storytelling becomes merely transactional. "It's not just a business exchange: you give me your story, I give you empathy; now I go home and feel better about having more privilege than you," she insists.

Ironically, the Left has been lambasted for its supposed lack of storytelling skills in the wake of the 2004 presidential election. Irani, along with her coeditors Rickie Solinger and Madeline Fox, were "pissed off" by that nullifying narrative and put together an anthology of essays called *Telling Stories to Change the World* in response.

"Transformation and social change are happening all around us," declares Irani, critiquing the idea that the Left needs a "grand meta-narrative" to be victorious. "There are so many people around the world who are not looking for a political party or for some giant structure to come in and tell them how to change the world." Instead, they are doing it themselves, and *Telling Stories* was meant to chronicle some of those do-it-yourself endeavors. It features essays about community-based and interest-based projects in Uganda, Darfur, China, Afghanistan, South Africa, New Orleans and elsewhere in which storytelling and art are used for social justice ends.

Irani encounters some resistance to her participatory theater workshops from those who think that the arts bear a peripheral relation to societal transformation. Irani argues

that it is actually the most efficient, profound means! "Most people, when they engage with an issue through the arts, they get it automatically," she says. "With the rational, you have all sorts of different justifications and things you can pull out of the air to resist actually engaging with a topic. When you talk about it, you sometimes don't really talk *about* it; you're talking *at* it, and you're talking *around* it. When you are engaging in the art and just experiencing, and bringing out a story, and bringing out a feeling, you are getting to the core of it, and you are *in it*."

Irani is definitely in it. Last year, she was awarded a certificate of recognition by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg for her arts work in immigrant communities. She continues to tweak *Mapping Remittances*, an audiovisual collaboration between multimedia artists and immigrant workers around the global journeys—and attendant politics—of their wire transfers. Whether it's addressing pollution with aerialists in her show *Jackie 'n' the Beanstalk*—set in the South Bronx—or leading theater workshops for children in occupied Iraq, Irani affirms that children of all ages must be able to "create something that you're projecting into the future." Rather than missiles, please then, let it be music. ■

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